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Journal of Philosophy of Education
The Journal of Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain
pesgb

Journal of Philosophy of Education, Vol. 54, No. 4, 2020

Beauty in the Darkness: Aesthetic Education in the Ecological Crisis

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Engaging with beauty can orient mind, heart and action in this era of ecological destruction. First, I present a vision of beauty that acknowledges some of its common critiques while salvaging it from claims that it is merely subjective, or worse, destructive. I then focus on how the ecological crisis elicits and invites participation in actions towards vulnerable things and the beauty they invoke. I reflect on my life experiences and engagements with art to help understand the possibilities and power in the beauty of vulnerable things and of actions towards them. While I acknowledge and address some difficulties with beauty as the basis for action, I suggest it is better suited to engage the ecological crisis than appealing to emotions such as hope or relying on prevalent ethical approaches. I end the paper by considering the transformative role aesthetics should play in reimagining subject focus, interdisciplinarity and character development in school curricula and pedagogy aimed at sustainability.

INTRODUCTION

The ecological crisis is dark. Annihilation, suffering, guilt, grief, despair: might we find beauty in it? *Can* we create beauty in it? Is beauty important or a luxury distracting from work of great urgency?

In the midst of devastation, we can cultivate warmth together as we share in the care of the sick and dying, gather courage in the face of stark odds, and find gratitude for relationships that persist or perish. Beauty springs into life when washing a pelican's fluttering wings free of crude oil or refusing plastic even though we are 'just one person'. Each moment, however grim, holds beauty: potent and potentially unfolding. The hopeless and ominous *magnify* our participation in acts of beauty here and now, as pervading blackness is chiaroscuro for flecks of light.[1] What happens when we usher, rather than suppress, this shine?

In this paper, I reflect on my experiences and practices to meditate on the power of beauty, and particularly on the beauty created and sustained by vulnerability. The ecological crisis proliferates swathes of precarity, but

within these are scattered gifts if we are open and respond. Our experience of vulnerable beauty is a miracle that elevates the spirit beyond those familiar cycles of hope and hopelessness. This has fundamental implications for the role aesthetics plays in sustainability education. Before leading to this point, however, I must briefly detour to the concept of beauty itself, which has been demoted and vilified in the last century.

RESTORING BEAUTY

To better understand the beauty in the darkness we first need to understand beauty itself. The word has taken a beating, associated with everything from superficiality to downright violence. It suffered a two-pronged attack from analytic and critical thinkers. Although beauty featured prominently in the moral theories of many important philosophers from Plato through to Hutcheson, Hume, Kant and Schiller, it was relegated to an undiscussable concept by analytic philosophers who felt it nebulous and incoherent (Murdoch, 1970). On the other hand, for critical theorists, beauty is not just a confusing semantic entity. It is a nefarious device: an undeserved privilege; a mechanism of exclusion (Berry, 2008); a tool for social capital (Bourdieu, 1984); an addiction fostered by, and in turn perpetuating neoliberalism (Pow, 2009). Nietzsche (1882) considered it a projection that cloaks rather than reveals its beloved.

No doubt beauty is susceptible to these and other co-options, but aesthetic nihilism is an overly blunt and soul-destroying response (Marcuse, 1978). That beauty is used to propagate harm does not imply it is necessarily harmful and to be abandoned. We do not give up deliberation because thinking is sometimes fallible, or avoid eating because our taste buds can be pulled towards unhealthy food. The antidote is to understand how beauty gets swayed and corrupted from its original promise, which is its commanding invitation and guidance into care, devotion and love. We need education to foster aesthetic literacy that sustains beauty's transformative power while alerting to its varied co-options away from serving life.

Beauty can show truth – or charm with illusion and distraction. It can give sense to, expand and stoke engagement in actual situations, relations and experiences of life, but can also lure us away from matters of deepest significance. Why is that? Many have tried to describe essential aesthetic features of a beautiful thing, such as symmetry, order or harmony. I will not wade these waters except to discuss one feature relevant to this paper. An enduring idea, from Aristotle through to Hutcheson and into the 21st century, is that beautiful things manifest unity amidst diversity. The aesthetic experience of beauty involves perceiving the coherence of the relationship between something and its various parts. What we consider the 'thing' turns out to be crucial here.[2] I think there are at least three connected ways we perceive (and conceive) things: through abstraction, through contextualising or dilating perspective and through imagination. As I see it, all three coexist but it is possible to emphasise one over the others in particular perceptions. As we will shortly see, doing so can be bewitching, blinding us to the possibility of beauty's truth, urgency and goodness. The

critical dimension of aesthetic literacy entails learning to recognise when this aesthetic ecology has lost its *own* unity amidst its diversity.

For example, a building may display a striking integration of variation when considered on its own, but appear hideous when built in the wrong place, or when exploitative factors in its construction become known. A person may appear physically beautiful until their motives are laid bare. Many cases of beauty rightly challenged by critical theory result from considering the aesthetics of phenomena independently of context. Seeing the context transforms the perception of the once beautiful thing.[3] No matter how symmetrical or balanced, the building now appears pretentious or colonial, the face distasteful. Once the context is understood, and the relations between the unity and diversity widened to consider a thing's place within its larger wholes, a new, larger aesthetic object is perceived. Critical aesthetic theories work primarily through such reframing. However, it is not the case that seeing things within larger wholes always reveals their ugliness. Sometimes local events and objects contribute to their larger wholes, lending themselves to what is beyond themselves. Their beauty can be unveiled through reframing, vibrating with meaning, humility and connection.

It would seem contextualising is therefore the aesthetic corrective to abstraction, but dilating our perspective also has its dangers when it pulls us out of relevant relations. To illustrate the point, I will consider an extreme example now and be more delicate about contextualisation later. It is possible to contextualise this age of earthly destruction in ways that curb its imperative. There is something awesome and even hopeful about the idea that evolution will go on and ecosystems re-complexify across the eons ahead, long after whatever damage much of our species lets loose. The splendour of the vision is deepened by contemplating Earth's replenishing power after previous ages of extinction. But the beauty of this vision corrupts if it leads people to disengage with actual suffering.[4] Such grandeur is a grandiose dilation of perspective, a god's eye view that can desecrate the very ground our aesthetic sensibilities weave into. It is perhaps medicine taken in small doses. Given the infinite connectedness of events in space and time, we must draw lines to ground perception and action in relevant spheres of concern.

Abstracting and contextualising are two ways of using imagination. By drawing or erasing lines, we gain new perspectives. Imagination also reveals the possible and the impossible. It can be used to deepen understanding of a situation or to flee from it, though the distinction between these is not always clear. For example, a science fiction story may forewarn of a technology's consequences through a rip-roaring action plot. In any case, it is sometimes obvious when fantasy divests from the world for impossible possibilities, diverting our aesthetic senses from their spheres of effective relation. Dewey (1934) argued that imagination should be integrated into envisioning the real possibilities of a situation. Without it, we see but the actual dispossessed of its own becoming. Imagination assists in responsively attending and developing what is nascent within the context of the quotidian (Greene, 1995). If beauty does not pull us out of the mundane in the slightest, it would not be felt as beauty at all. If it pulls us out too

far, it risks becoming a vehicle for bad faith and escapism. Imagination can enhance the significance of our immediate encounters, bring what is implicit in our experience into greater felt awareness, and saturate our lives with meaningful insight and possibility. Envisioning how to restore my local watershed from the first-person perspective of one of its residents (say a Syrian refugee or a fox) requires substantial yet contextualised aesthetic imagination.

Our capacity to engage with beauty, to recognise its presence and potential, to nurture it into being and becoming and to become beautiful in turn, is best directed within the aesthetic relations embedding us. I am tempted to call this sphere 'place' but this term is not precise enough for the kind of experience I am trying to get at. My approach will be to focus on the experience of beauty and the quality of relationships it generates rather than locating it spatially. Discovering what this sphere is itself an act of commitment to beauty.

VULNERABLE BEAUTY

Many kinds of beauty are relevant to environmental education and philosophy. The crooked majesty of the oak tree, the sublimity of the thunderstorm, the symmetry of the butterfly, the lioness' care for her cub, the seemingly superfluous intricacy of the passionflower, its interdependence with its pollinator: each are important experiences to uncover and appreciate in our work. I will not argue the point here, but I remain convinced and hope to eventually develop a framework that illuminates how an aesthetic engagement able to encounter and respond more directly to the world is crucial for sustainability education.

This essay is concerned with the creation of beauty in response to a particular kind of beauty. The beauty of the vulnerable. What is "the vulnerable'' and why is it beautiful? To be vulnerable is to be exposed to possible danger or easily harmed. A foetus elaborating complexity is beautiful, even if she miscarries.[5] The blue whale is beautiful, sifting plastic through her baleen with her calves careening by her side. Vulnerable things have a particular kind of beauty, and evoke it in turn because the desire to protect the vulnerable is itself beautiful. The intertwining crises of our time magnify the extent of the vulnerable and our range of possible responses. Buddhists remind me that everything is always precarious. Indeed. Nevertheless, the ecological crisis intensifies my experience and understanding of this vulnerability and is therefore saturated with forms of beauty to experience and contribute to. Never has so much potential beauty laid before me.

Experiencing this beauty is not a substitute for feeling pain or concern for the vulnerable. Part of my feeling of pain is an opening up to beauty. There is something heart-warming in the brutal photos of giraffes grazing outside the encroaching sea of Nairobi. For millions upon millions of years, each of their ancestors met the world and now they too step up to life, eyes bright and standing tall. They may suffer and their flourishing is hardly assured. But my sympathy for their precarity is flush with admiration.

All beauty has some capacity to carry me into self-transcendence. I feel myself a minute part of the infinite when gazing into the immensity of the night. The balance and proportion of an eagle in flight evokes a sense that our plethora of technologies often lack agility and grace. But when a being in danger is before me, and the continuity between its history and its possible futures is something that involves me, I am de-centred with an urgency felt by its demands. I am compelled to see it clearly and to respond. The beauty of a vulnerable being invokes my sympathy and care, and channels action into its prosperity. In so doing, it has the power to pull me out of my self-centred framework, bringing me into more direct sense and engagement with real experiences, relationships, and situations.[6] When this happens, the abstraction of a separated self is healed. The unity-in-diversity becomes the vulnerable thing and their evolving situation – myself an integral aspect of it.

Many artists know this. A painting or poem coming into existence insists on open nurturing attention. An artist does not 'let things be' unless that is what is asked for.[7] Action is continuous, even if that action involves taking time to see the creation anew or giving it space to come into itself. Attention and action are not to serve an unchanging aim but the needs of the object as it progressively comes into being. Its flourishing depends in part on our ability to see what it is, and is becoming, and our imagination is fastened into this engagement. The sustenance of the being depends on sustained care. A 'beautiful act' is one where the actor commits to this sustained attention. Sustained care in turn generates sustained capacities and habits to care. A move that is dishonest to the emerging creation creates capacities and habits of carelessness.

We can engage in beautiful acts in the realm of art, but also in the realm of relations. In either case, there is a secret feedback loop in our devotion. The actor sees the beauty of the vulnerable and precarious, witnesses the potentiality and offers beauty back to the world through surrendering to its incarnation. So, with that, revisit a melody that drew you to warm and loving tears. This feeling conjured, I ask: what kinds of actions could you engage that might be as beautiful as *that*? What situations could pull you into such delicate grace?

When I lose myself to helping a vulnerable thing flourish, my love and care for this being makes me vulnerable too. A beautiful act is undertaken with care, attention and presence to what is happening. I am now vulnerable: committed to a precarious promise, a part of my own being is bound to that of another. Its pain becomes my own, and with its death something in me is lost as well. In this way, the vulnerable which I attend shares with me its vulnerability. It offers me an aesthetic context that grounds my relations. In a world that could have evolved any which way, I am given an astonishing gift.

BEAUTY IN THE DARKNESS

When the world appears merciless, beauty's sheer unexpectedness arrives as a life-affirming miracle. Its arising suggests beauty might furtively await

expression elsewhere across the universe, and also therefore within me too. In this way, it is lifesaving', experienced as a unique and unprecedented gift (Scarry, 1999). Through beauty, I fall back into attention, humility, generosity – into love. In this essay I focus on the beauty of the vulnerable, those unfurling kernels of the cosmos where we find ourselves entangled with some fragile beauty that has wrapped our fate into its own.

The ecological crisis is undoubtedly ugly. I often feel trapped in a machine geared for elaborating increasingly interconnected ways of destroying mind, heart, body, place and planet. But if ugliness begets ugliness, we need to find beauty more than ever. Unfortunately, people refuse the gift of witnessing and contributing to beauty in ways proportionate to the darkness faced. There is an irony in this, given the gut-turning reality of this colossal destruction is the very thing that brings forth vulnerable beauty all around us, each calling for multitudes of beautiful response. Austin points out that "if we fear, we will refuse to taste. If we are forced, it will not taste good. Likewise, we will not see beauty in that which we fear. It will be ugly" (Austin, 1985, p. 200).

Though I often return to its arms, I worry that hope is often too unreliable an emotion to lay much weight upon. Hope attempts to obliterate fear but is charged by it and depends on it. It plays the odds and withers at the very time it is most needed. Hope is future-oriented, it gets me judging current conditions against hypotheticals rather than focusing on what actual conditions I bear witness to and might bring into the world. When this does not cast me into despair, it tends to fling me into utopian visions. Concentrating on imagined ends rather than immediate relations makes me susceptible to utilitarian thinking. I become willing to sacrifice immanent current situations for a vision of the future I conceive as desirable and attainable. These visions may be beautiful – but often in an unhinged and fantastical sense, undercutting responsive attention and devotion to what is nascent in the situations I am already immersed in.[8] Duty, on the other hand, is a Trojan horse smuggling in another form of instrumentalism while professing its opposite. Rather than paying attention to the actual situation, deontological positions rely on treating situations as tokens of a type. The situation is seen as a means to a moral law, the execution of which is the only consequence of significance. I am learning that beauty is more reliable than hope and more responsive than duty.

Orienting action towards the experience and cultivation of beauty recalls perspectives and practices of Ancient Greeks (e.g. Aristotle, 2002), whose concept of *to kalon* did not split morality from aesthetics. However, to the extent that interpretations of ancient virtue ethics aim at self-development, such approaches can also lead astray. Artists are again instructive here. Beauty demands an authentic and open-minded response. Years of attending to beauty may make the artist honest and generous towards beauty in their work. (They may remain deceptive and selfish in other aesthetic contexts, such as in their relationships with other people. Here is another example of the 'transference problem' in education.[9]). But these virtues are *side effects* of the purpose, which is to acknowledge and bring forth beauty.[10] Using something beautiful to cultivate virtues generates vice.

Even when a situation is hopeless, beauty can move us to action. In fact, the possibility and power of participating in beauty is most acute when hope flees the heart. I therefore see beauty helping circumvent a perennial dilemma that environmental educators have long faced. As crises magnify, it becomes increasingly necessary to prompt people into action. If I present the reality of a harrowing situation, I worry it will be too overwhelming and lead others to depression, anxiety and despair. These emotions are likely to generate an apathy that harms the soul and cuts participation in a positive change. However, if I sugar-coat the situation, by hiding grim details of suffering and collapse, or through presenting insufficient solutions, I might also generate apathy. If facts about mass species extinction are shortly followed by the message 'but there is a solution,' the meta-message is that people are figuring it out. Many environmental educators are aware of this double bind. Opening to and participating in beauty skirts this dilemma because beauty is most compellingly intuited when we see evermore clearly the situation we are faced with. As mentioned, Murdoch (1970) pointed out that the greatest art is not fantastical escape. It seeks to reveal the truth of our lived experience. Beautiful acts similarly endeavour to see and respond truthfully. This requires a courageous commitment to honestly transform ugliness into vulnerability, and vulnerability into beauty.

One way to learn to stand open to beauty within the ecological crisis is through engaging beauty within dark situations in human social life. I have noticed that certain experiences, such as the dying and death of my parents while I was a PhD student, ruptured my anaesthetic mechanisms of denial, and ushered the possibility of my experiencing and creating beauty. While we might recoil in horror at the thought of a dying partner or child, or frantically set ourselves to avert this doom, no response is restorative without opening to the beauty the situation offers. The husband of a dying wife can enrich her remaining time, and even feel gratitude for the softness and intimacy the tragedy gathers into their thoughts and deeds (Affifi and Christie, 2018). Any 'fight' against her disease risks sacrificing these delicate possibilities when focused fearfully on ends at the expense of means. Opportunities for peace and gratitude dissolve when thrown into a panicky struggle. On reading this, Jeff Stickney wondered whether this is a form of palliative care (personal communication, May 12, 2020). In some cases, it might be. The black rhinoceros *may* be doomed. Even if they are, it is beautiful to witness someone fall in love with them and commit to their flourishing during their final days on the planet – rather than, say, calculating that investing in them is not 'worth it'. In any case, I suspect that what ensures their dwindling numbers' flourishing is also what will safeguard their survival: companionship, freedom to roam and fields to forage, an autonomic nervous system not constantly stressed by encroaching poachers and the like. Attending to vulnerable beauty tempers panicky environmentalism, and probably leads to more effective and personally sustainable actions.

Beauty might well be, as Augustine (1976) had it, a plank amid a sea of waves, but not in the Freudian (1916) sense of elevating us past the pain of the situations we face. This view skews our aesthetic sense towards dilated visions and fantasies. Beauty is not a justification for the atrocity, nor an

excuse. It is not an escape, a salvation, or a balm. Beauty incites wounds. It is a concrete aspect of devastation that does not reduce its ugliness, even if the appearing beauty shows that the destruction has something life-enhancing within it. It is not bad faith to meet this outstretched hand. We can have gratitude for the beauty offered and meet it there, even while shuddering before the tragedy. Mountaintop removal mining unleashes ruin measured across miles and millennia. But even amidst the piles of gravel and the streams now meagre and alkaline, constellations of life are taking tenuous hold. It is a disservice to oneself and the world to refuse to acknowledge beauty's inevitable emergence and the participation it invites.

DARKNESS IN THE BEAUTY

Beauty can be concealed behind ugliness, but ugliness can also be cloaked under the surface of beauty. For instance, although I feel and gravitate towards beauty, I slip all too easily from its light. It has been suggested that engaging in beauty transcends selfishness, and that this experience affirms life and existence. This affirmation has the power to propel action even in the face of doom. But however much we experience this affirmation, selfishness always returns as a possibility and an actuality (Murdoch, 1970, p. 91). It returns via several channels and I will mention three. By now, the formidable grip of the globalising culture habituates nearly all into some 'individualistic' patterns of thought, feeling and action. But even if these sociocultural relations did not exist, it is clear selfishness cannot disappear entirely. We must choose to take other lives for our own to persist. Instead of devotion to another's flourishing, in such cases we face the precariousness and push it over the edge. Cultivating experiences that saturate the taking of life with gratitude and humility is a good start for negotiating this fact, but the tension between the beauty I witness and engage, and the facticity of my 'fallenness', is inevitable and creeps into greater felt awareness as I pay attention to the aesthetic dimensions of my actions.[11] There are obvious dangers in getting mired in this line of thinking. Another struggle that emerges has to do with the nature of thought. Thinking anticipates and plans for consequences. Once I experience beauty's life-affirming qualities, I am tempted to seek out the causes that bring it to bear. Instead of being pulled into care, I try to push myself in. This may not matter; soon enough the vulnerable wraps me into its fold. Sometimes, however, my awareness of consequences leads to temptations that more directly threaten engagement with the beautiful. Just as the artist needs to fend off the encroaching desire for recognition or accolades, I fall back into selfishness, sometimes very subtly. I become aware of how I am perceived by others and I begin to typecast my answer to the vulnerable, with whom I may be slowly and imperceptibly losing touch. This is not the kind of ecological identity I think we need. It is not the kind that beauty asks us for.

For these and other reasons, those attending beauty must develop a certain resilience. Increased sensitisation to the aesthetic dimension of actions leads to increased perception of the inevitable ugliness that is also part of human existence. The darkness of a situation reveals a light, but the path to

it is full of shadows. With the gift comes the burden. Aesthetic literacy must involve understanding and navigating these inevitable *aporias* and bifurcations. But how? One approach to these newfound challenges is to reorient one's gaze towards one's actions. In their varied ways, this is common to deontology, consequentialism and virtue ethics but I think these are generally fatal to the nascent possibility and promise of the experienced beauty. Foregrounding my actions pulls them away from aesthetic engagement, rather than drawing them into the vulnerable other's situation. These varied threats thwart the balance among abstraction, contextualisation and imagination that can ground my service in the flourishing of the vulnerable other. More promising is restoring the experiencing of the beautiful and allowing it to orient the terms of my actions. The solution is to get captured once again in the claim of its beauty. It is an aesthetic recalibration. Perhaps there is even room for a much more modest 'hope' once so calibrated – a hope with fantasy bounded by the beautiful others' imminent possibilities: I *can* remove crude oil from *this* pelican's feathered coat.

Sometimes it is not clear what the way forward is. What is best for *this* vulnerable other depends on how we look at the situation. While it may be obvious when we stray into some extreme forms of fantasy or abstraction, it is not always obvious where within the spatiotemporal horizon I should place my focus. Consider the beauty of coniferous forests dependent on the carnage of fires. How I should scale up or down is not something that can be settled through a general statement in a journal article. And, in fact, this paper runs into some of the very dilemmas I am attempting to articulate. The paper emerged in a direct response to suffering birds and trees and has tried to serve them but through the process I have gotten caught up in the craft of writing. While the paper itself has its own vulnerable beauty and potential, its aim slips away from itself to potential effects remote from its inspiration, and then back again. I do not know if academic writing is a form of fiddling while Rome burns. I think it often is. This reminds me of times I get caught up in the frenzy of being 'part of the solution'. I settle on a project that is certainly easier and seems more uplifting than paying sustained attention to the vulnerable. My actions loosen from the context that instigated them and run astray. Am I too greedy for a way forward? And to what effect? A commitment to beauty sometimes means sitting with the confusion or the horror. As hard as I try to ground my efforts, I often dilate my vision and entertain fantasies. Paying attention sometimes means keeping some lines drawn and redrawing them when necessary.

Perhaps it is inevitable that my ugliness lurks beside my beauty. The darkness beauty is set against is not merely in the world, but within me too. Perhaps beauty needs such a background to emerge. Beauty is not a sanitised concept, but an ever-present aspect of phenomena, given meaning and potential. It awaits within everything, invites my movement towards it, but always in a context with uncertainty and peril. Part of the nature of beauty is that its creator would not settle for less if it knew more was possible. But I do not always know that more is possible. My darkness is something I find myself already engaged in and only ever haphazardly and imperfectly

uncovered. Aesthetic recalibration is not a continuous process because I only ever catch up with myself in moments of imperfect realisation.

EDUCATION IN THE DARKNESS

Beauty's contribution to perception is itself hardly perceived, understood or explored. Beauty is socially suppressed, especially among young people; its experience sanctioned almost exclusively to faces and physiques, or the gendered appreciation of cars and flowers. The beauty of vulnerable things and their special call upon the young (as much the old) persists as but a vague inkling submerged under webs of other concerns. This means the experience of vulnerable beauty is itself vulnerable as much as it is beautiful. No wonder few understand or trust that beauty is powerful enough to sustain the spirit through the bleak and barren.

How can we work with children to help them invest into these vulnerable vulnerabilities? My contribution is not to answer this but to solicit a new focus for pedagogical approaches, experiments and relations. However, I can offer some broad points implied by my discussion.

The problems and suggestions explored above concerning critical aesthetic literacy, aesthetic ecology, devotion to vulnerable beauty, the dialectics of beauty and ugliness and the development of resilience, need to be experienced and worked through in concrete situations. Concrete situations form the basis for students' understandings of beauty, which can then spread the ground for the aesthetics of other experiences. While not always directly targeting obvious victims of the ecological crisis ('obvious' because I suspect the incapacity to devote oneself to art or the care of a hurting friend are symptoms of the same problem), starting with concrete situations where things in a child's world appear as loveable and worthy of devotion, initiates the aesthetic ecology in which care for beauty can grow and flourish. This is the aesthetic ecology where the vulnerable places its lover into the unity of its situation.

For some, the heart is drawn to painting, for others nature, for others still human relationships. We work with our students wherever beauty seeds. But it must be allowed to seed. Providing space to feel, think about, think through and respond to beauty is crucial. I remember hiding from snipers by a bed of sunlit violets in the churchyard woods near my childhood home. I remember their delicate unexpectedness and arresting power. They may have later been trampled in the frenzy of whatever important battle we were enacting, but their 'vague inkling' stayed with me. The violets found a crack in the pavement to take root in and survive. We need to find these cracks and we need hammers too for when we find none. However, extreme care is needed if beauty's power is not to become paralysed by the perception that it is just another thing 'the adults think is good'. Waiting for moments may sometimes be better than imposing them, and a light touch better than a Midas touch.

Assuming students are supported in exploring their response to beauty during their primary years, in high school they could deepen these responses and consider how beauty's call points them towards their calling.

For example, a beauty-focused approach to biology would ground and be grounded in students' concerns; the mysteries and processes of the living Earth in all its scales unfolded from those vantage points.[12] Phytoplankton photosynthesis no longer seems remote and dry when one's beloved whales depend on them. The Calvin cycle may finally take on some urgency when one learns its critical enzymes can be disrupted by heavy metal pollution. The entire approach would aim at helping students fall in love with and commit to their beautiful worlds. Biological content knowledge is the means not the end. Direct inquiry into real biotic relations reveals beauty, threats to that beauty and invites beautiful responses to these threats. We can create curricular visions that facilitate this aesthetic cycle so fundamental to the health and well-being of not only our students but the world they interconnect with. Critical aesthetic literacy helping students uncover how their aesthetic engagement in these concrete situations is threatened and co-opted could complement this, aimed at honouring and safeguarding beauty's power.

Beauty forms the basis of no national curriculum I know of. School systems focused on skills and character development seem to miss this dimension significantly from their focus. Where I reside, Scottish education policy currently foregrounds the development of certain 'capacities' aimed at fostering lifelong learners (Education Scotland, 2004). This involves generic skills and dispositions seen to be relevant in work, social and civic domains. The progressivist trend towards capacities in educational policy seems 'child-centred' but slides towards accommodating the vagaries of neoliberal economic (and now COVID?) life. The shift from content to skills is analogous to the shift from attending others to attending oneself. I have suggested that putting the cart before the horse in this way is particularly lethal to engaging beauty. If *led* by inspiration, a desire for content arises and skills develop in turn. Skills cultivate themselves in contexts that matter to the learner. Those contexts are provided by the subject content, which is the aesthetic locus for the skill or disposition. Natural and cultural heritage abounds with potentially inspiring things that take time to show themselves.

We also need to learn from the persistence, courage, vision and sensitivity of people who have devoted themselves to beauty in action, art and science. The beauty they have witnessed, created and shared persists across centuries and cultures for reasons hardly reducible to class and colonialism, despite the role these have played in the messiness of history. For this reason, subject-specific curricular changes are scarcely sufficient. Many in the STEAM conversation recognise the aesthetic dimension of all subjects should be illuminated and integrated (Burnard & Colucci-Gray, 2019). Adding a voice, I propose that trans-disciplinarity be grounded in an approach to education aimed at fostering recognition of, response to, and collaboration with beauty. Melville can help the budding biologist love his whales. Mycorrhizal symbiosis might point a way forward for supporting a hurting friend.

A final word about pedagogy. Educators often speak of modelling practice. Insofar as our craft involves working in concrete situations with the

young, who are themselves vulnerable, we can perhaps do no better than to learn to see and bring forth the beauty in our students, and in our commitment to their flourishing.

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NOTES

1. 'Chiaroscuro (from Italian *chiaro*, 'light', and *scuro*, 'dark'), a technique employed in the visual arts to represent light and shadow as they define three-dimensional objects'. https://www.britannica.com/art/chiaroscuro
2. See Gordon Bearn in this Special Issue for another take on 'things'.
3. See Stickney and Bonnett (in this Special Issue) and Weston (1996) for a related discussion of how changes in contexts such as landscapes alter our perceptions of them.
4. Including the suffering of all beings, human and otherwise.
5. As I have experienced, her brevity brings forth a unique kind of beauty, drawing my wife and I into new, loving understandings of ourselves and each other.
6. Murdoch (1970) made this point about beauty in general. It is particularly true with vulnerable beauty.
7. 'Letting things be' plays a fundamental role in Bonnett's (e.g. 2004) Heideggerian approach to environmental perception and education. Letting things be may sometimes an appropriate way to engage vulnerable things and taking part in their flourishing. It is however not sufficient, as he acknowledges in his call for more 'dialogical' approaches (p. 94).
8. Hope also often irresponsibly places the burden of action on children (e.g. Van Poeck and Östman, *this issue*).
9. Cognitive scientists are compiling increasing evidence that it is very difficult for humans to establish generic rather than domain-specific skills (e.g. Kirschner and Hendrick, 2020, chapters 7, 22, 29).
10. Of course, these virtues can orient the artist into beauty and assist in its further nurturance.
11. I am pointing out a danger that can arise through becoming increasingly sensitised to the aesthetics of vulnerable beauty: that is, that our increased sensitisation can lead to our increased complicity in harm, with no 'easy' solution. I am not advocating relativism of the 'we are all destroyers' type. Rather a kind of 'resilience' in the face of this problem, that I introduce later in this paper.
12. I am suspicious of the split often contrasting scientific (general/categorical) knowledge and artistic (or 'sensory', or 'Indigenous') perceptions (e.g. Bonnett 2004, Abram 1996). Such splits (themselves categorizations) succumb to their own critique. They are also constraining. Scientific/categorical knowledge is aesthetic and contributes to the uniqueness of aesthetic encounters and relations. Categories can be aesthetic contexts, a point to which I think Bateson (1979) was leading. On the other hand, aesthetic experience is itself imbued with categorical ways of thinking and engaging. The general and the particular are co-present in both the world and our experiences of it. We must learn to see both and integrate them wisely (see Affifi, 2019, 2020).

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